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ABSTRACT

English as a Second language (ESL) instruction for business and commerce at Marymount College (California) serves a population with diverse characteristics but one central need: to develop a clear understanding of a relatively unfamiliar world of work while also acquiring terminology from an unfamiliar language to describe that world. The course uses a textbook in business English and examines the major areas of business, including international trade. A significant problem is the misunderstanding of terminology. Students are required to present oral reports using periodicals, which if properly selected, can enhance vocabulary development. Course enrollment has exceeded enrollment in a similar course in English for science and technology, with proportionately higher enrollment of Asians than Middle Eastern students. Distribution of sex varied more by nationality than by subject area. Challenges to teaching the course go beyond purely cultural and linguistic ones to the need to provide additional occupational exposure and help in career decision-making. In this institution, the course differs sharply from general vocational ESL courses, the ESL course for science and technology, and vocational or professional preparation courses. (MSE)

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ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES -- BUSINESS AND COMMERCE:

PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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"English for Special Purposes: Business and Commerce" has been taught at Marymount College, Palos Verdes, for a total of seven semesters since 1981, with a total enrollment of 89 students. A similar course, "English for Special Purposes: Science and Technology" has been taught at Marymount for a total of five semesters since 1979, with a total enrollment of 43 students. Students who have an interest in these subject areas must choose between the two courses, since credit can be given for one -- but not both -- of the two courses. The two courses are part of a larger English as a Second Language (ESL) Program at Marymount which includes three levels of 4-unit courses in ESL (ESL 100, 101, 102) as well as an intensive workshop (ESL 150) designed to give individualized instruction in the four basic communication skills. These courses are intended as preparation for the wide variety of liberal arts courses offered at Marymount College, a two-year college which prides itself on being "the only independent institution in Southern California devoted solely to the liberal arts and leading to an Associate in Arts Degree".

Students in ESP: Business and Commerce have come from a wide variety of backgrounds, with one shared characteristic -- all are non-native speakers of English with an interest in mastering the basic concepts of business and commerce within an English-language framework. For most of the students, their task is not that of fitting an English linguistic framework over a familiar world of work experienced already via their native language. Their task is instead that of developing a clear understanding of a relatively unfamiliar area of the world of work -- often on the basis of little "real-world" work experience -- while at the same time acquiring a terminological system from an unfamiliar language (English) to describe that world.

In accordance with Peter Strevens' taxonomy of English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses,[1] we might perhaps classify the ESP Business and Commerce course at Marymount as a "pre-experience educational ESP" course. Whether one could classify the course as "discipline-based" or as "school subject" ESP is less clear, since Strevens' use of the terms is not altogether clear to me. In terms of proficiency level in English, the course at Marymount is open to all students who have reached a level of ESL 101 or higher. The quantity of instruction is limited to three hours per week for a fourteen-week semester. The goal of the course is to impart a broad introduction to the world of business and commerce to students already able to function academically -- at least minimally -- through English.

Instruction in ESP Business and Commerce consists largely of discussion of subject matter and problems drawn from the textbook Business Concepts for English Practice by Barbara Dowling and Marianne McDougal. Students are also asked to give short reports of from three to five minutes in length on articles of special interest to them, taken from a wide range of business journals and newspapers. A visit to a small business -- preferably one engaged in international trade -- is being planned in order to give students a chance to talk directly with an entrepreneur about the problems of running a business in rapidly changing times and to get a sense of the "reality" of the world of trade and commerce.

The textbook seems to answer very well the needs of the ESL student exploring the business world for the first time. The major areas of business are examined in succession, with due emphasis being given to international trade, where appropriate. Linguistic exercises allow the student to become

familiar with business terminology in a variety of ways. The main problem that the instructor encounters is that both instructor and students may assume that the students understand vocabulary items and phrases when in fact they do not. A little careful probing often reveals that the students are wide of the mark in their understanding of the items. The problem comes not with the items of general use long familiar to students in ESL courses, nor with items of highly restricted technical usage -- since in that case students will immediately ask "What does that mean?" The problem lies with the items which students think they understand. Here, strangely enough, we are not dealing with extended meanings of familiar items used in a more specialized way -- the instructor is usually on the alert for possible problems in that area -- but with items whose general phonetic shape seems familiar enough to the student, who then proceeds to attribute an odd set of semantic properties to the item -- e.g., interpreting "aptitude" as "attitude".

The oral reports of the students, planned for the second half of the course, should yield interesting student reactions as to the comprehensibility and inherent interest of a wide variety of periodicals. Here the instructor cannot assume a priori that periodical materials which American students would find easier will be as comprehensible to foreign learners of English. Periodicals written in "layman's English" meant to demystify the world of business and finance might contain such a high proportion of colloquialisms and slang expressions that the foreign student might prefer a more "cerebral" publication written in relatively technical but clear formal English.

In looking at the student enrollments for ESP Business and Commerce and for ESP Science and Technology, some interesting patterns emerge.[2]

A total of 89 students have enrolled in the seven semesters of ESP Business and Commerce taught since 1981, while only half that number (43 students) have enrolled in the five semesters of ESP Science and Technology taught since 1979. In terms of ethnic groups and cultural/geographical areas[3], Asians accounted for 76% of the students taking ESP Business and Commerce, but they accounted for only 25% of the students taking ESP Science and Technology. Students from the Middle East, on the other hand, accounted for 58% of the enrollment for ESP Science and Technology. Of the Middle Eastern students, a slightly larger percentage of students from Arabic-speaking countries enrolled in ESP Science and Technology than in ESP Business and Commerce (fifteen students as opposed to twelve, respectively), but the Iranian students showed an almost exclusive preference for ESP Science and Technology (ten students, versus one student in ESP Business and Commerce).

As mentioned above, students from Asian countries showed a marked preference for ESP Business and Commerce, with Japanese accounting for 47% of all students, while Chinese accounted for 13% (matching Arab students) and Koreans for 8%. On the other hand, Japanese students amounted to only a fifth of the students (nine students = 21%) enrolled in ESP Science and Technology, and not a single Chinese or Korean student has ever enrolled in the course.

In looking at the sex ratios of the students enrolled over the years in the two courses, one finds the same marked preponderance of male students in both courses (65% in ESP Business and Commerce; 65% in ESP Science and Technology). Within the ethnic groups, however, interesting differences again emerge. A majority of the Japanese students were male (two-thirds of the students in ESP Science and Technology, and 61% of the students in ESP Business and Commerce), and virtually all the Arab students in both courses were male, as were nearly all the Korean students enrolled in ESP Business

and Commerce.[4] On the other hand, 60% of the Iranian students enrolled in ESP Science and Technology were female, as were two-thirds of the Chinese students enrolled in ESP Business and Commerce. Students from Spanish-speaking countries were evenly divided between male and female in ESP Science and Technology, but were largely male (62.5%) in ESP Business and Commerce.

As mentioned at the outset, few students in ESP Business and Commerce have had any work experience in their home countries, and few have a clear vocational goal for their post-baccalaureate years. The students are quite young; in the present ESP Business and Commerce course, their ages range from 19 to 21 years of age. A few have assisted their relatives in the family business, and a few intend to continue in the family business. In fact, it is remarkable how few intend to follow in the occupational footsteps of their mothers and fathers. Compounding the lack of experience in the world of work and the vagueness of career goals is the nearly universal lack of any occupational or career training through the native language in the home country. Only one student in the current course in ESP Business and Commerce -- a European -- has ever had vocational training. In that particular case, the student -- a Dutch male -- had received training through the German language in Switzerland. In terms of major and minor areas of study at Marymount College beyond their coursework in ESL, only two students mentioned a business-related major or minor. Most students thought simply that "it was a good thing to know something about the business world".

The instructor of ESP Business and Commerce, then, is faced with a number of challenges beyond more purely cultural and linguistic ones in presenting the subject matter of the course. On the cognitive/experiential side of the question, the instructor must help the student explore an

occupational universe encompassing many cultures and continents. On the affective/motivational side of the matter, the instructor must somehow help the individual student find his or her way through a maze of personal career choices, since once one moves beyond the textbook, the personal career decisions that an international student must make -- and continue to make -- are daunting.

Stepping back now from the details of the program at Marymount, it seems appropriate to ask the question, "What is the relationship of a course like ESP Business and Commerce to other courses in an ESL curriculum -- which is itself embedded in a broader liberal arts curriculum?" ESP Business and Commerce differs from other ESL classes[5] in that it has a highly specific linguistic subject-matter content -- namely the universe of linguistic expressions and associated concepts that are characteristic of the world of business and commerce. Other ESL classes, on the other hand, may be subdivided on the basis of level of proficiency in English attained, or of the particular communication skill emphasized, but are otherwise free of any bias in terms of course content. Within the larger liberal arts curriculum, ESP Business and Commerce represents a bridge to the world of the social sciences and to the rapidly changing world of current affairs, rather than to the perhaps more universal and timeless verities of the more literature-oriented liberal arts curriculum.

In comparison to ESP Science and Technology and similar courses in an academic setting, ESP Business and Commerce shares a similar orientation and instructional approach, but differs sharply in its subject matter -- the latter dealing with the universe of discourse familiar to social scientists, the former with that of natural scientists. In comparison to vocational ESL (VESL), the setting, the backgrounds of the students, and student goals

all sharply differentiate the course at Marymount from the vocational or professional preparation courses usually described in VESL literature. At Marymount, students are exploring possible career options as part of a process of self-development and broad education in a liberal arts framework; they are not preparing themselves to function in a highly specific work environment where language is primarily a tool for interaction in the work setting.

Turning to the instructional materials and other resources available for teaching, we have seen that ESP Business and Commerce is well supplied with good texts and an abundance of periodical literature. "Real-world" work situations in the form of local businesses engaged in international trade likewise abound in the Los Angeles area. The principal problem for the instructor is that of extending and deepening student awareness and experience of business situations and of the vast world of the global economy which forms the backdrop to even the small local business in the 1980's. As such awareness of, and empathy for, people involved in international business grows apace with the fascination with the intricacies of the dynamic world of international trade, one hopes that student motivation will be kindled and that the students themselves will at times take the lead in exploring that world and in charting their courses in that world. Here the individual student is the key.

FOOTNOTES

1. Peter Strevens, "The Teaching of English for Special Purposes", in Strevens, Orientations in the Teaching of English, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977, pp. 89-108.

2. It should be kept in mind that the students enrolled in the two courses represent mutually exclusive populations, since students can enroll for credit in one of the two courses, but not both

3. See charts in Appendices A and B.

4. This reflects the student population from the Arabic-speaking countries and from Korea at the school.

5. Here we exclude ESP Science and Technology from consideration for the moment.

APPENDIX A: ENROLLMENT IN ESP BUSINESS AND COMMERCE

Overall Enrollment

Year	Male	Female	Total
1981	4	4	8
1982	12	3	15
1983	13	4	17
1984	7	2	9
1985	8	5	13
1986	7	9	16
1987	7	4	11
	58	31	89

Enrollment by Ethnic Group

	Male	Female	Total
Japanese	26	16	42
Chinese	4	8	12
Korean	6	1	7
Thai	1	2	3
Indonesian	3	1	4
Arab	12	-	12
Iranian	1	-	1
Hispanic	5	3	8
Dutch	1	-	1
Swiss	-	2	2

APPENDIS B: ENROLLMENT IN ESP SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Overall Enrollment

Year	Male	Female	Total
1979	9	5	14
1980	5	-	5
1981	6	1	7
1982	3	4	7
1983	5	5	10
	28	15	43

Enrollment by Ethnic Group

	Male	Female	Total
Japanese	6	3	9
Chinese	-	-	-
Korean	-	-	-
Thai	-	-	-
Indonesian	-	2	2
Arab	14	1	15
Iranian	4	6	10
Hispanic	3	3	6
Dutch	-	-	-
Swiss	-	-	-
Vietnamese	1	-	1

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dr. James J. Duran received his Ph.D. in Linguistics from Stanford University in 1975, after receiving an M.A. in African Studies from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, and an M.A. in Linguistics from Michigan State University in East Lansing. His dissertation research at Stanford University and in East Africa centered on problems of language planning in an African context. He has had a strong interest in the practical problems of teaching languages as diverse as Spanish, Irish Gaelic, and Swahili. Dr. Duran was the first coordinator of Stanford University's Special Language Program, under which as many as 17 classes in 14 languages have been taught in a single academic year. Dr. Duran now teaches English as a Second Language at Marymount College, Palos Verdes, and at West Los Angeles College.